

A Dance of *Pachucos* and *Prostitutas*: Class Representations and Folklorization in Costa Rican Swing Criollo

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Joint Conference of the AMS-Southwest Chapter & SEM-Southern Plains Chapter
Spring 2014

The University of Texas at Austin

On November 2011, president Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica, along with Minister of Culture Manuel Obregon, declared swing criollo to be intangible cultural heritage of Costa Rica.¹ Swing criollo is a hybrid dance style, often described as swing dancing set to the music of cumbia, that was once associated with the working-class riff-raff and virtually unknown outside of the capital of San José. By the time of its recognition as national heritage, it had become widely popular throughout the country. It is danced in clubs and taught in parks during summer festivals. One can take free lessons before a night of dancing in discotheques, or pay for lessons from private instructors operating out of their homes or in the country's many dance academies. Costa Rican dance companies brought the style to international stages, where it is featured as a popular dance, a folkloric tradition, and often a tourist attraction. In short, over the past ten years, swing criollo has seen an explosion in popularity and a successful attempt to define the genre as national folklore.

In this paper, I analyze why, at this particular moment, swing criollo became part of national folklore, and what implications that might have for notions of folklore in the twenty-first century. I believe that the genre's national acceptance can be traced to a campaign of folklorization by a few dedicated dance instructors. These instructors have worked to establish swing criollo as a different type of folklore, one defined in relation to modernity and urban popularity, rather than in opposition to it. The most well-known dance company and the one most recognized for promoting swing as heritage is La Cuna del Swing, or "The Cradle of Swing," directed by Ligia Torijano. I look at Torijano's project of staged swing criollo as one that contests the static and traditional nature of folklore and engages in a new discourse of "authenticity." I focus on La Cuna del Swing's 2012 staged history of swing criollo, "Permiso...viene el swing," as the point in which the style became canonized, periodized, and rendered legible as heritage in the space of the theater. By framing and delineating the self-proclaimed "old guard" and visually rendering a defunct space of swing's early history, a dance salon, La Cuna del Swing packages swing in such a way that it becomes a sort of museum piece where an older culture is put on display. However, this top-down understanding of tradition oversimplifies the folklorization process and fails to recognize ways in which those associated with swing criollo's subaltern class claim agency. The dancers of the "old guard" engage in self-mythmaking and self-canonization and use the staged spectacle to demonstrate not conflation to a single group, but highly individualized personal histories and dancing styles. In addition, swing's folklorization has been in conjunction with its rise in popularity; this has, in turn, fed new definitions of folkloric authenticity that privilege *popular* heritage, *urban* folklore, and

¹ Gerardo González, "Es Oficial: El Swing Criollo Ya Es Patrimonio Inmaterial de Costa Rica," *La Nación*, May 4, 2012, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/musica/emswingem-patrimonio-inmaterial-Costa-Rica_0_1266473455.html.

modern traditions, all designations that push at the boundaries of state-sponsored traditional displays.

In the first part of this presentation, I will outline swing criollo's history from its origins in the working class of San José to its declaration as national patrimony. I then look at the format of the staged spectacle "Permiso...viene el swing" as an ideal format for rendering swing legible as an established tradition. Finally, I examine the ways in which staged swing criollo contests the nature of folklore. I conclude that the folklorization of swing criollo, rather than embalming it in its most traditional form, has led to its mainstream popularity. This popularity neither fetishizes subaltern groups as the primitive originators of the dance, nor erases the working class from the narrative.

Timeline of swing criollo's nationalization

During my time in Costa Rica, salsa musician Bernardo Quesada explained to me that during the 1950s and 1960s, swing dancing was widely popular in Costa Rica. When swing music fell out of favor, dancers continued dancing swing style to the new musical import to Costa Rica, Colombian cumbia. Swing dancing set to cumbia became associated in the 1970s and 1980s with San José's seedier dance salons and the working-class "chusma," or "riff-raff." This is also the time when swing experienced its infamous ban: the story of respectable dance salons hanging signs that prohibited swing dancing is now part of swing criollo's officially recounted history. When the dance rose to national prominence years later, the dancers of this first period of hybridized swing, the 1970s and 80s, would become known as the "vieja guardia," or "old guard" of swing criollo.

In the early 1990s, two events occurred that boosted swing's national visibility. Swing became featured on the television program *Fantástico y sus Piratas del Ritmo* (1988-1996), alongside other popular Latin dances such as cumbia and merengue. It was also made accessible to a middle-class public through dance academies. The most commercially successful academy, Merecumbé, was established in 1991. Costa Rican anthropologists López and Salazar see swing criollo's incorporation in television programs and dance academies as a commercialization of the style that also led to its standardization. Unlike the highly improvised style of the old guard, the style taught in dance academies is considered more rigid, formal, and linear. Still, through the 1990s, swing criollo never achieved any sort of official recognition and it remained a local phenomenon.

In 2003, the short video documentary *Se Prohibe Bailar Suin* was produced by filmmaker Gabriela Hernández. The documentary tells the history of swing criollo and features several dancers of the self-proclaimed "old guard," who recount stories of the dance's prohibition and its early days as a dance of the "chusma." Younger dancers and middle-class dancers who discovered swing criollo later also tell of their experiences with the style. At the end of the film, all of the interviewees gather to dance together at the discotheque Karymar, where Torijano had recently begun giving free swing criollo lessons. This was around the time that Karymar developed the nickname "La Cuna del Swing," or "The Cradle of Swing." Torijano started a dance company of the same name and embarked on a process of folklorization of swing that has lasted until the present. This has led to significant international recognition. In January 2011, Minister of Culture Manuel Obregon awarded Torijano the National Prize for Traditional Popular Culture for her work in promoting swing criollo. In response to this award, she said she would like "for the world to associate swing criollo with Costa Rica, much like tango is

associated with Argentina.”² On November 30 of that same year, the president of Costa Rica, together with the Minister of Culture, declared swing criollo intangible cultural patrimony of Costa Rica. The publication of this degree in May 2012 coincided with La Cuna del Swing’s staged history of swing criollo, “Permiso...viene el swing.”³

Format of “Permiso...viene el swing”

As I have mentioned, I believe that the spectacle “Permiso...viene el swing” encapsulates the folklorization of swing criollo over the past ten years. To be accepted by official organizations, folklore must be legible in a certain format. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that heritage is a new construct, one that “depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions in themselves.” (7) Using Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s definitions of *in-situ* ethnographic installations, in which a folkloric performance is guided by contextual frameworks to make sense of ethnographic fragments, I consider “Permiso” to function as a museum piece where the old style of swing criollo is presented in a heavily curated “context” for its preservation. This serves to establish legitimacy for swing as a newly-minted tradition, canonize a set of actors as the “old guard” (including Torijano), and periodize swing criollo’s stages of development.



Figure 1: Layout of La Cuna del Swing’s “Permiso...viene el swing”

² Ferlin Fuentes, “Músico Y Estudiosa Del Baile Ganaron Premio,” *La Nación*, January 29, 2011, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/artes/Musico-estudiosa-baile-ganaron-premio_0_1174282636.html.

³ Gerardo González, “Es Oficial: El Swing Criollo Ya Es Patrimonio Inmaterial de Costa Rica,” *La Nación*, May 4, 2012, http://www.nacion.com/ocio/musica/emswingem-patrimonio-inmaterial-Costa-Rica_0_1266473455.html.

“Permiso” establishes authenticity for swing criollo through the presentation of the “old guard,” described as the “true *protagonistas*” of swing criollo. As described on the Facebook page for the event, it is

the story of Swing told and danced by its very dancers. We have characters [*personajes*] like Gringo, Cupido, Campanera, Primo, Fao and Jaime of the Old Guard, of the 31 dancers we have onstage...it’s the story of Swing from its beginnings all the way to its declaration as Intangible Cultural Patrimony. This spectacle is unique in style and is very criollo and authentic.

The stage layout also locates authenticity with the style and salons of the old guard. Since the production of *Se Prohibe Bailar Suin* in 2003, swing criollo’s mythology has been rooted in its prohibition in respectable places. The first scenes of “Permiso” take place in a mock dance salon with a sign that reads “SE PROHIBE BAILAR SUIN.” In the fourth scene in the presentation, the introduction of the style of the “old guard,” the narrator for the program announces that swing dancing is now permitted. The respectable dance salon where older styles of Colombian cumbia and bolero were danced has now been turned into a mockup of the Salon Cañaveral, one of the dancehalls cited by old guard dancers as the birthplaces of swing criollo. Torijano and her dance classes also become part of swing criollo’s canon. Near the end, she leads the onstage dancers in the kind of classes that she routinely gives at salons and occasionally in summer festivals in San José.

The re-presentation of the defunct dance salon Cañaveral also points to swing criollo’s positioning in terms of a “value-added” heritage industry. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that “[i]f heritage as we knew it from the industry were sustainable, it would not require protection. The process of protection, or of ‘adding value,’ speaks in and to the present, even if it does so in terms of the past.” (150) If the spaces of swing criollo’s origins no longer exist, then the theater functions as a museum, and the seedy dance salon becomes its ethnographic installation. Modern swing criollo in this reading can thus be defined in opposition to the “old guard.”

Contested folklore in “Permiso...viene el swing”

I have presented a cynical reading of what folklore can represent, but as I have mentioned, the reality is far more complex than an embalming of old styles and a packaging of exotic Others for the sake of national heritage formation. Dancers of the old guard engage in processes of self-mythmaking and self-canonization that reveals the highly individualistic nature of their dance style. The distinction made between dancers and choreographers, or those who have produced swing criollo and those who have brought it to national attention, is not a strong division either. In other words, the folklore of swing criollo is self-curated by the folk, including Torijano herself. Finally, swing criollo’s folklorization has been part of a larger legitimization of a newer form of folklore, one which privileges dance in self-recognized popular, modern, and urban forms. This stands in contrast to older notions of the folkloric as diametrically opposed to modernity. It also nourishes swing’s popularity and allows dynamic new forms of dance to emerge. In the remainder of this paper, I will elaborate on these points to show how La Cuna del Swing’s folkloric displays contest static, hierarchical folkloric categories.

Carlos “Gringo” Moreira has been one of the most visible faces of the old guard. His visibility and claims to swing criollo authenticity have allowed him to influence the mythology

of swing criollo, as he claims to have invented one of the genre's most famous features – its group dancing style. He performs this style in “Permiso” but his claim to have invented it dates to at least the 2003 documentary by Hernández. I use the terminology of mythology not to imply an untruth or unprovable assertion; in fact, he can be seen leading group dancing sessions in the early 1990s on the TV show *Fantástico*. Instead, I use the term mythmaking to suggest the way in which historical narrative interacts with popular imagination. Likewise, Torijano, as a long-time dancer of swing criollo, can be said to engage in mythologizing of her place in swing criollo history. The individualistic dancing styles of the old guard in “Permiso” also creates a visual contrast between the more standardized styles of later generations, interrupting the narrative of a unified traditional style.

Another interruption of hierarchical categories of tradition is La Cuna del Swing's valorization of popular dance forms as tradition. Twentieth century binaries that pitted the urban, modern, and cosmopolitan against the rural, traditional, and regional/provincial have often been debunked. Karl Miller's *Segregating Sound* provides one example of how folklorists insistent on upholding these binaries have often created divisions where there were none. In the case of swing criollo, a dance of urban working-class Costa Ricans drawn from Colombian cumbia and US swing music, its very existence as Costa Rican folklore disrupts narratives of ethnic, racial, and class purities. La Cuna del Swing's willingness to perform popular, urban folklore contests these hierarchies without embracing the problematic side of “hybridity” discourses that has been discussed by postcolonial scholars such as Shalini Puri.

Finally, it is worth considering the dynamics of Torijano's other projects: dance classes and competitions on contemporary Costa Rican television, appearances at summer festivals, and the regular swing criollo nights in the discotheque Karymar. The discotheque in particular is a site where the meaning of swing criollo as popular dance is reinterpreted through swing criollo couples' competitions. In competitions at Karymar, young couples choose their own music mix, often incorporating hip-hop, rock, operatic and occult themes, cumbia, merengue, or other pop genres such as disco. The highly flashy and virtuosic displays place swing criollo in dialogue with these other popular dance genres in a performance format that relies heavily on the signification of many styles at once. There is no sense of swing as part of a bygone era or a folkloric dance of national heritage; to these newer dancers, it is seen as part of contemporary Latin American and Costa Rican dance culture. The rhetoric of borrowing moves and styles as necessary is echoed in the statement of dance academy culture. Dance instructor Liliana Valle, for instance, has stated that any dance move can “become a tool [for swing criollo], an acquired form of corporal and psychological knowledge, so [dancers] can use that knowledge when [they] try to take on another dance.”⁴ (quoted in López and Salazar, 164) This dynamic form of swing criollo keeps the style vibrant as a tradition, bringing in new dancers and encouraging new meanings while still recognizing its working-class origins.

In summary, swing criollo has become part of Costa Rican national heritage only in the past ten years, due mainly to the folklorization efforts of dance instructors and researchers such as Torijano. Its folklorization was effective because swing criollo's historical narrative was successfully adapted to officially acceptable and easily recognizable forms of heritage. Events such as “Permiso...viene el swing” served to canonize swing's actors and periodize its styles, thus providing a neatly packaged history for a newly minted tradition. Instead of viewing its folklorization as an embalming of an older style, I choose to see this style of staged presentation

⁴ Original: “se vuelve una herramienta [para el swing criollo], un conocimiento adquirido corporal y psicológico, entonces se puede recurrir a ese conocimiento cuando ya logro interpretar ese otro baile”

as a different kind of folklore that contests the logic of the category, encouraging the legitimization of modern tradition and popular urban folklore. In addition to destabilizing hierarchies of folkloric forms, La Cuna del Swing's performance serves to encourage new forms of swing criollo in the clubs of San José. Because swing criollo is such a new tradition, a study of the ideologies and staged performances that drive the style as national heritage can teach us much about the changing faces of official culture as it becomes institutionalized, industrialized, and popularized in the twenty-first century.

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